

COMMUNITARIANISM AS A RESPONSE TO THE IDEAL OF EDUCATION FOR AUTONOMY

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Abstract

“Personal autonomy” in liberalism talks about the free will of individuals to live according to their own. The thought has been very influential in the liberal philosophy of education which views an individual as a social atom abstracted from her social context. In this paper I have discussed communitarian response to this liberal ideal of education for autonomy and have suggested that an individual is basically not an atomistic but a social self who learns best in the company of fellow human beings. But it does not mean that being embedded in a context she cannot exercise her autonomy.

I have tried to strike a balance between an individual’s autonomy and her role in the community. In addition, the communitarian expression of national identity as a form of community has also been favoured as one of the aims of education. A criterion of respect for the culture, values and basic human rights of both the members of a national community one is a part of and those of other nations have been reasserted as a solution to the human conflicts.

Introduction

“What should be an aim of education,” has been strongly debated and influenced by wider currents of thought and intellectual movements. The most influential thought in this respect was presented by Kant (1784) in his counter to the subject “what is Enlightenment?” which laid down the foundation of a modern view of autonomy.

The idea of a rationale autonomous individual has been so valued in liberal democratic traditions which places a heavy demand on education and educators to bring about what Kant says “enlightenment” among mankind (Kant. 1784: 1). The liberals regard autonomy as a prime justification of education to cherish important liberal values as freedom, democracy and a notion under individuals can exercise their democratic life according to their own way. (Kerr 2002: 13). In the pursuit of liberation, the traditional methods of education which Freire (1970) terms as ‘Banking Concept of Education’ where students’ thinking and creative powers are suppressed by the authority of teacher, was criticized by many liberal writers like Dearden (1975), Wringe (1997), Enslin (1999), etc. Instead a concept of education was emphasized that should develop among students the qualities like ‘self-direction’, ‘self-activity’, ‘independence’, and ‘being a chooser’(Dearden, 1975: 1) and the ability to think rationally and critically (i.e., critical pedagogy, ‘problem-posing’ concept of education of Freire (1970).

But in spite of the support of liberal democrats the claim that autonomy is an aim of education has not gone unchallenged. The most devastating criticism and challenge to the idea of choosing and sustaining how to live a desirable life for oneself based on one’s own reason came from the postmodernist writers who reject the very condition of both rational autonomy and rationality itself (Wringe 1997: 117). They cast doubt on and are sceptical about the notion of truth and everyday reality. They assert that an individual cannot justifiably exercise her reason on the basis of the knowledge that happens to pass to her through systematically misleading sources (media, advertising images, etc.) and which is viewed as “partial, corrupt and of contingent nature” (Deleuze 1984; Foucault 1991: cited in Wringe 1997: 117).

Another most influential thought in this respect is the concern of communitarians (Miller 1992, Kerr 2002, etc.), who argue against the rational autonomous individual completely detached from the context, i.e., society or community she is embedded in. They challenge autonomy as an over-riding aim and lay emphasis to shape education that prepare students to take up their roles in the community. Even this concern of communitarians have been critiqued as failing to recognize the oppressive side of traditional communities particularly by feminist writers who view it as a way that leads to the ‘subordination of women’ (Friedman 1993: 233).

My focus in this paper will be on the communitarian response to the ideal of education for autonomy and I will be adopting a balanced, rather I should say a pragmatic, approach to know how one could be a part of community yet understood as free to establishes her identity. With this approach, I will make an attempt to see how

education can prepare students to act rationally within a community without creating some kind of what Kerr (2002: 13) says 'an imaginary independent self'. In my focus, I will concentrate upon Miller's (1992), Friedman's (1993), and Kerr's (2002) concepts of communitarianism along with the views of some modern philosophers and educational theorists.

An Individual - Atomistic or Social?

To understand best how an individual can be free and a member of a community at the same time, it would be apt to see what relationship exists between an individual and a community. Does an individual exist as a single entity completely disconnected from her context as liberals view her or as a part of a community firmly fixed in her social settings? I personally feel myself more sympathetic with the communitarian and feminist concept of the self as 'inherently social' because the self is guided by what surrounds it. The liberals view, as Dearden (1975: 63-71) suggests, that a man's "self" must be directed by his 'own activity of mind', i.e., his thoughts and actions cannot be explained without reference to his own "choices, deliberations, decisions.....or reasoning". But how one's 'activity of mind' is shaped and how the 'choices, deliberations and decisions' are made? The source or knowledge upon which these choices are made stems primarily from 'our history or interaction with others – our development, our belongingness in a community and a cultural traditions. (Kerr 2002: 13). Living in a 'supermarket culture' our 'needs' and 'wants' do not originate from ourselves but are shaped by forces in the society like media and advertising. Both the communitarian and feminist theorists reject the concept of atomistic individual which Friedman (1993) calls 'an abstract individualism', i.e., a thought that reckons human beings as social atoms, abstracted from their social environments and ignores the role of social states ... in representing the very identity and nature of individual human being. (Friedman 1993: 231).

The outcomes of one's action or decision taken on one's own reason, as I can perceive, may not necessarily restrict to one's own self but most probably may inflict some influence upon the overall society or community. The fact that an individual is not an atomistic but social self puts a constraint on the freedom of a person which I think is a rationale obstacle to a certain degree. Let's take a couple of examples; suppose a person A is walking in the street revolving a stick in the air with her hand which hits a passer-by B's nose. When B asks A why did she hit her, A promptly replies it is her autonomy and freedom of action. The B angrily replies "your autonomy and freedom stops where my nose starts". Similarly, suppose a society is comprised of different groups of various religious faiths; if one group, considering freedom of speech as its right, utters some remarks against the values highly esteemed in another religious faith, it may spark anger among the members of that group. In this situation, the freedom of speech could result into conflicts and clash among different groups of a society. In both these examples, the outcomes of free action do not restrict to one's own self or to one particular group but inflict damage upon others.

Should then autonomy of this kind be an aim of education? My answer is definitely "No" because I see it as constituted by materialistic and selfish interests where one does not think beyond one's own self rather than the autonomy which is good for both the individual and her community. Charles Taylor (cited in Kerr 2002: 13) says in this respect, "the self which has arrived at freedom by setting aside all external obstacles and impingements is characterless". Schools should provide what Arthur (2000: cited in Smith 2001: 4) suggests 'an active understanding of the common good' or at least, according to my view, an understanding not to impinge on other's rights. The highly individuated selves or radical excessive autonomy seem to be a problem from both communitarian and feminist perspectives. Friedman (1993: 238) views these selves as "incapable of human attachments based on mutuality and trust, unresponsive to human needs, approaching social relationships merely as rationally self-interested utility maximizers... creating social institutions that tolerate, even legitimize, violence and aggression." Considering autonomy moved by self-centred desires, we need educational practice that release the learners from "the forces, as Smith (1997: 132) asserts, that drive us into isolated individualism, the inner sanctuary from which we emerge as lonely individuals to enjoy the benefits of the 'market' and the supermarket."

Autonomy within a Community:

If we accept an individual as 'inherently social' denying the atomistic concept of liberals, does it mean she is absolutely bound to follow the laws, values and morals of the community she identifies herself with and she cannot exercise her will or autonomy at all? This is an important question where education, I think, should play a crucial role to help students adopt what I call earlier a 'balanced' or 'pragmatic' approach to exercise their autonomy

existing at the same time within the communal structure. This may be difficult, even challenging in some circumstances, but I think is not impossible.

Communities often have been critiqued, particularly by feminist writers, as “exploitative and oppressive towards many of their own members” (Friedman 1993: 240). Feminists view this oppression with special relevance to women and express their grave concern over the subordination, exploitation and abuse of women by various practices of communities. They deny any “political theory that lends support to the cultural hegemony of such (oppressive) communities and that supports them in a position of unquestioned moral authority” (Friedman 1993: 240).

This criticism is of significant value to strike a balance between an individual’s autonomy and her role within a community. The communal norms or practices that cause oppression of any sort and usurp even the basic human rights must not be followed but instead must be challenged by exercising one’s autonomy. Choosing a life partner, for example, is a basic human right for both males and females but in some societies, particularly in less educated societies, females are deprived of this basic right. They are forced to get married by their families, i.e., the community of their origin or unchosen community (Friedman 1993: 252-253), to someone whom they have never even seen in their life. Similarly in the class-ridden societies (e.g., tribal communities in Pakistan and India), the feudal lords even deny the basic right of self-respect of the lower class community members.

Should education in these oppressive communities prepare students to be loyal to their communities? My answer is obvious! “NO”. The community members must exercise their autonomy to break up these which I would say ‘unjustly harsh and tyrannical’ communal laws. By so doing they still will be the members of their community struggling to reform its laws for the common good instead of being imaginary independent selves of liberal tradition. Schools should develop autonomy among students so that they can question what Friedman (1993: 239) calls ‘the moral legitimacy of the communal norms and traditions’ to bring about enlightenment in the society. This way schools can fulfil the useful purpose of education of “freeing individuals from internal constraints...like ignorance (of basic rights), prejudice and unfamiliarity with possible ways of life... and empowering individuals from external constraints by enabling them... to improve their position within the social structure” (Jonathan 1997: 3).

National Identity as a form of Community; Should National Identity be an Aim of Education?

One expression of communitarianism, as a view of relationship between individual and society, emphasizes national identity as a form of community. The collective identities, according to Miller (1992: 86), that people possess are predominantly national identities which give them a strong sense of belonging to each other based on their shared beliefs and long history of living together, i.e., their national past, with the hope of its endurance into the future.

This account of Miller’s national community has been criticized as fictitious and a manufactured item with the history based upon myths. The leading figure in this criticism is Enslin who claims that autonomy as an educational aim is undermined if myths and dilettantish national identity is included as a part of education (Enslin 1999: 104). The questions arise are the national myths, essentially based on falsehood? And what if we teach children both the bright and dark sides of the myth, will learner’s autonomy still be undermined? And if not, I do not see any reason to exclude national identity as one of the aims of education.

Miller does not think it necessary that the myths should be historically accurate (Miller 1992: 92). He gives a sound argument that the historical accounts are just the different interpretations of historians which may be competing with each other and not necessarily false or irrationally based (Miller 1995: cited in White 1997: 19). As far the second question, I do not think that the learner’s autonomy is going to be undermined if she is exposed to both the positive and negative aspects of her national past. On the contrary, it will enhance her rationality to establish her own identity and decide what is true in the light of different historical interpretations. What is needed is the objectivity and impartiality on the part of the history teacher.

Teaching national identity is thought to be a kind of indoctrination by liberals but inculcating into students’ minds that they ‘should or must be autonomous’ to do whatever they like, I think, is another kind of indoctrination (only if excessively emphasized), which can result into conflicts between individuals. Education for national identity is also criticized on the ground that it enhances the possibility of conflicts and aggression among nations (Miller

1992: 89). To answer this criticism we need to differentiate 'nationality' from the idea of 'nationalism', i.e., one's own nation is superior to other nations (White 1997: 15). In response to the apprehensions of nationalism, Nussbaum (1994) presents the concept of cosmopolitan education offering a vision of world citizenship which transcends the boundaries of local and national communities. He emphasizes that "we should regard all human beings as our fellow citizens and neighbors" (Plutarch cited in Nussbaum 1994: 3).

Nussbaum's idea of thinking in terms of mankind as one community or nation repudiating national patriotism seems too abstract to be feasible or in Wingo's (2007: 3) words "cannot avoid seeming a bit utopian or ethereal". What we, as educationists, need is to cultivate a sense of respect for the culture, values and basic human rights of both the members of a national community one is a part of and those of other nations. This commitment, let us hope, will serve to hold many nations together and will bring peace and happiness among humanity.

Conclusion:

Autonomy, community or national identity – which one should be an aim of education, is a subject to hot debate. The educational theorists appear to differ widely both in favour or disfavour of each of these likely aims of education. In this essay, I have tried to make an attempt to adopt a balanced approach and have suggested not excluding entirely any of these components from the domain of education, as each has its due significance in an individual's life.

I have tried to know how a self can be understood as rooted in given conditions simultaneously react responsibly and considerate in her decisions with her context. A self is basically inherently social and learns best in the company of others rather than as a solitary independent self. But it does not mean that she is absolutely bound by the norms and traditions of her community and ceases to be autonomous altogether. She may be more autonomous in some circumstances but less so in others. The criterion I have suggested to act autonomously is not to impinge upon but to respect the rights of others. This particular conception of autonomy, I think, should be used to guide educational policy and practice.

At the end of the essay, I have tried to evaluate Miller's view of national identity as a form of community with relevance to national identity as an aim of education. I do not see any harm of including it as one of the aims of education as it gives an individual a sense of who she is which puts her in a better position to act rationally. In response to the critique that it can enhance the possibility of aggression and conflicts among nation, I have pointed out that national identity rather than 'nationalism' should be the part of education. Along with that, a need has been asserted that education should cultivate a sense among individuals to respect the rights, values, cultures and traditions of other nations which hopefully can bring the conflicts to an end.

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